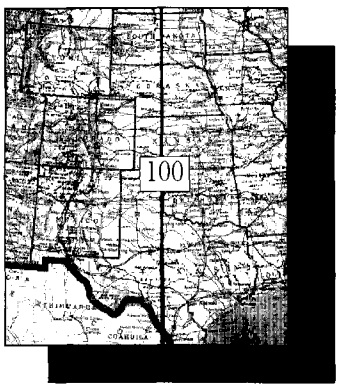
by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Whistling Dixie

Historians have been arguing since the 1950's whether the West ought to be understood as a frontier, a region, or the seamless westward extension of Eastern and Midwestern America. Beginning in the 1980's the debate intensified, owing to the work of the so-called New Western Historians who like to think that they started it all. Led by Patricia Limerick of the University of Colorado at Boulder, the New Western Historians have identified Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis as their nemesis and, after him, Ray Allen Billington who devoted his career to expounding and extending Turner's work. According to Limerick, Turner, Billington, and almost the entire American historical profession before 1980 confused frontier history with regional history and—even worse—with nationalist history. Neo-Westerners like Limerick, Donald Worster, Carl Abbott, and Malcolm J. Rorbaugh accuse their paleo-Western forebears of leaving out of their books the experience of Indians and Mexicans, blacks and Asians, women and children, bison and grizzly bears, the Mexican Spotted Owl and the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, mountains and rivers, rocks, trees, and history professors and concentrating nearly to exclusion on the peripheral adventures of narrow-minded, wedge-headed, inbred Anglo-Saxon barbarian males bent on murder, rape, pillage, and exploitation. In the interests of challenging and amplifying this over-inflated sideshow melodrama, the New Western Historians have emphasized the idea of regionalism in their own work, attempting to demonstrate how much of a settled, peculiarly Western civilization—or civilizations—existed before the Anglo hordes arrived on the scene.

The recent emphasis on regionalism as a concept in the history of the West is as full of irony as it is of interest, "regionalism" being a term not ordinarily associated with New Left historians except as a pointer to demonize something or someone. Turner himself anticipated the new way of thinking about the West in an essay, "The Significance of Section in American History," by which he tried to



counteract his earlier conflation of the West with the frontier. In the same way Gerald Thompson, a modern historian at the University of Toledo, found himself loosely associated with the New Western school after concluding that the West thought of as a region is a more effective vehicle for thematic unity, and more inclusive besides. But Thompson, far from being of the New Left persuasion, is a generic conservative, among the most good-naturedly trenchant critics of his New Western colleagues. Aware perhaps of reactionary connotations attached to the word "regionalism," the New West historians have done their best to replace them with progressive overtones. Carl Abbott, arguing for what he calls an "urbanization model" for comprehending the history of the American West, describes how regionalism has been modified and weakened by urban development. As early as 1880, Abbott notes, 30 percent of the population of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific states were urban dwellers, compared with 28 percent for the rest of the United States, according to the U.S. Census taken that year.

My own view is that the West has always needed to be seen as both as region *and* frontier. Turner never claimed all of American history to be frontier history, simply that frontiering was the defining, and in fundamental ways unique, experience of the American people. The Western frontier, from the perspective of those who were, culturally and racially speaking, generic Americans at that time, was either the defining or the emblematic way of life representing the primary force within a region, in addition to being a geographical part of the same region. No matter what percentage of the American population out West lived in "cities," the frontier was the perceived norm, experientially, socially, and politically. For Mormons living in Salt Lake City in the latter half of the 19th century and well into the 20th, life was not "urban" in the way that it was in New York, Philadelphia, or Charleston, as town life for the citizens of Laura Wilder's De Smet, South Dakota, was substantially different from life in Thoreau's Concord. The American pioneer, whether he lived in a chinked log house a hundred miles from the nearest neighbor, in a frame house in a prairie village, or in a spacious adobe mansion in the presidio of Old Tucson, belonged to a distinct American type going back as far as Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay. To this extent, of course, he is not prototypically "Western," but to admit as much is hardly to deny that the frontiersman reached his fullest development in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West. The breed was essentially established in the First American West, meaning Trans-Appalachia. Its spirit is suggested by Malcolm Rorbaugh when he writes of the fierce independence and resistance to authority characteristic of the North British and Scots-Irish stock. "In the end," Rorbaugh says, "the citizens of the First American West were no more inclined to respect the Federal Government than they were to obey the dictates of Richard Henderson," the wealthy judge who at one time laid claim to almost all of modern-day Kentucky. Moving across the Mississippi River and beyond, the descendants of the earlier frontier stock, pursuing frontiering through successive generations as other American families pursued banking, commerce, or the law, saw to it that the federal government away off in Washington did not substantially interfere in social, economic, and political matters affecting the settlements and territories of the West.

Yet the sodbusters, cattle ranchers, fur trappers, gold miners, and Indian fighters were not the whole story of the West. There was, of course, another aspect to Western development—not so radically different a one as the New Historians

make it out to be, but different enough to make a difference, especially in the long run. The founders, developers, and boosters of the West's great cities were certainly provincial, like the cities themselves, but they built with the great cosmopolitan cities of the East in mind, copying or aspiring to the Eastern urban model while importing Eastern values, cultural forms, and political institutions. More than anything they wished their Western cities to be "modern," and progressive. Statistically at least, the West was becoming an urban region to the extent that N.S.B. Gras, an economist, and Robert Park, a sociologist, described it in the 1920's as 12 or 14 metropolitan areas connecting ranching and farming towns with mining communities and drawing the products of all of them to the new centers of national trade. While the West was substantially still a colony of Eastern investors and the federal military establishment, cultural exchange moved mostly in one direction—from West to East. With the coming of age of the urban West in the 20th century, however—and especially in the half-century since World War II—patterns of influence have become much more complex, reflecting not just the nationalization but the internationalization of the economy.

Urban development in the West has been the vehicle by which region has overwhelmed frontier, and is now busily finishing it off. The frontier has resisted its fate, beginning with the Populist counterassault between 1890 and 1940, when the isolated rural West, alienated almost as much from its own cities and towns as from those of the East and Midwest, revolted against Western industrial centers and the national capitalist system in an attempt to localize the bases of politics and finance. More recently the frontier has asserted itself through the Sagebrush Rebellion in the late 1970's and the early 80's, the People for the West and Wise Use groups, the Tenth Amendment movement, and the war against the War on the West. These, however, have proved of little use in reinvigorating and preserving the remnant of the Old Frontier. This is partly because some of them—like Wise Use—are really only puppets of the urban-capitalist enemy. A more important reason is that the frontier was bought off as early as a couple of centuries ago.

Patricia Limerick is not all wrong when she charges that Western history in essence is nationalist history. The frontier, however eccentrically, was drawn into the greater nationalist and expansionist fervor almost from the beginning. Like almost everyone in America in the 19th century, frontiersmen were seduced by the romance of Western expansionism and Manifest Destiny and also by the missionary aspects of these obsessions: carrying Anglo-Saxon culture, democracy, and Protestant Christianity to the Spanish, Mexicans, and Indians of the American West. Almost as bad, they succumbed to the temptation to try to have it both ways; to own and control the land and other resources of their places of settlement while chivvying subsidies from the central government as a means of consolidating ownership. It did not take long, however, for the East to realize that the frontier, when it came to protest and dissent, was given more to rhetoric than to action (as Rorbaugh has pointed out).

The West *is* a region. But without a vigorous frontier culture it is certain to become less and less a distinctive one, largely geographical in nature. Absent, furthermore, a strong frontier presence—or anyway a legacy—the West is unlikely to be capable of summoning the audacity, the courage, and the determination to press regional identity and regionalist policies, much less nationalist ones. In spite of recent talk about devolution and the Tenth Amendment, the United States continues—year by year, month by month, day by day—toward a greater homogeneity, a greater conformity, a more complete centralization.

Some of the reasons for this surrender are doubtless geopolitical, above all the territorial division between that portion of the West dominated by region, and that where frontier holds sway—barely. This division is one that is usually ignored by historians and politicians, though in fact it is crucial to understanding the West, its past, present, and future. For most people the West begins at the Hundredth Meridian and goes all the way to the Pacific Coast. For others—artists and poets mainly, like Walter Prescott Webb and Edward Abbey—the West means the Rocky Mountain or Intermountain West, exclusive of California and the western portions of Oregon and Washington. The real division, in other words, is geographical and cultural, not political and administrative. It is the division between region on the one hand and frontier on the other. To many Westerners today, frontier alone truly means West. But if the West indeed is synonymous with the Intermountain area, then Western nationalism is surely an impossibility for geopolitical and political-territorial reasons, since no sane person believes that a Western American republic—running south from Canada to Mexico along the Rocky Mountain cordillera, splitting the continental nation in two—can ever be a feasible proposition, or even a likely dream.

Unfortunately there are other, even more basic reasons for concluding that any Western nationalist or regionalist movement is likely to be futile. Westerners five and six generations ago were too busy making a living from a howling desert to have time or energy left to prevent Washington from dominating the West, and their descendants today are too dependent on Uncle Sam to insist that it should be otherwise—as the federal government is too reliant on Western deserts as a place to store old people, roll pork barrels, explode bombs, and draw incoming missiles away from the White House. The West has no formal regional culture, no discrete body of learning, no rhetorical mode, as the South still has. Unlike the South, the West went from the territorial stage to statehood before acquiring its universities, and even then these were developed, along with the curriculum, from Eastern systems of education imposed by Eastern politicians. The West was won largely by the Scots-Irish, who were then submerged by immigrants from alien cultures, advertised for and imported by Eastern industrialists and their bought representatives in Washington. Today, the Indian tribes out West have a culture, as the Mexican-Americans do; Westerners do not, although the frontier itself continues to limp along in a distinct though much attenuated way of life that has proved remarkably resilient and resisting, under the circumstances. The Tenth Amendment movement is isolated, and the Committee of 50 States is not exclusively a Western enterprise; the county movement, in Catron County, New Mexico, and elsewhere, has been infiltrated by anarchists arrived from somewhere else. Recreationists, industrial tourists, second-home scum, and retirement retreads are flooding in from all over the United States, and the world. Any son of the Old West today who believes that the West will rise again is not only fooling himself. He *is* a fool. c